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THE SURVIVAL OF MUSIC

By HENRY F. GILBERT

NOT long since one of our most eminent American music critics propounded the inquiry: "Who can account for the survival or disappearance of musical works?" He proceeded to specify numerous compositions by Dvořák, Tchaikovski and Gounod which were formerly welcomed with great acclaim, but which are now fast falling by the wayside. After calling attention to the apparently inexplicable fact of the survival of Rossini's "Barber," with its old-fashioned formulas and methods of procedure, he concluded by saying, "Truly this is a little world of great mysteries."

The original inquiry is in the nature of a leading question inasmuch as it suggests an answer. Especially to a person of my philosophically pugnacious temperament does it act quite as a challenge. My own viewpoint presses itself upon me with such an insistence that I cannot forbear giving it utterance. Let us see, therefore, what we can accomplish by analysis and reflection toward contributing a satisfactory answer to this question.

What is it which makes some music to live; to be held in loving remembrance, and other music to fade from the memory and soon be forgotten? One is tempted to say at once that it is the melody in a piece of music which causes it to live; or the lack of it which causes it to be forgotten.

This is superficially true. In fact, it has a dangerous plausibility. But there are melodies and melodies. Many pieces of music die and are forgotten which nevertheless are very melodious. Others, again, in which the melody does not apparently play such an important part, will live a long time. The truth of the matter is that as long as we look at the externals of music merely, this point will not only puzzle us very much but really no satisfactory explanation of existing musical phenomena can be arrived at.

By the externals of music I mean Rhythm, Melody, and Harmony. We are told that music consists of these three things. Many persons indeed would fain have us believe that this is all it consists of.

But how about the spirit of the thing? Rhythm, Melody and Harmony are certainly the materials of music, but their

combination into a piece of *true* music depends upon something other than a mere knowledge of the laws of Rhythm, Melody and Harmony. Most of us recognize a piece of *true* music at once. In some mysterious manner it captivates and compels us to listen to it, whereas, when we hear a piece of *made*, or artificial music, we usually have to compel ourselves to listen. In fact it may be said that while true music compels us, its counterfeit insists that we compel ourselves. Yet both are constructed of the same elements: Rhythm, Melody and Harmony. It looks, therefore, as if the life or death of a certain piece of music did not depend *per se* on these elements, but upon the spirit which their combination may or may not express.

Ditters von Dittersdorf used practically the same tonal elements in his music as did Mozart. His rhythms, the turn of his melodies, and his harmonic schemes, were much the same. Yet his name is making very rapid progress toward the limbo of complete forgetfulness, whereas Mozart is still very much alive. Also Eberl, who was actually held up as a model for Beethoven, is now somewhat dead whereas, if I remember rightly, Beethoven was *facile princeps* as far as number of performances in the last musical season in New York.

No; many can combine the same elements of music and yet there shall be a difference. Yet so cunningly are these elements combined that this difference shall not be at once apparent, and most contemporaries will be unable to distinguish between *true* music; *i. e.*, that which is genuinely inspired or written in response to a spiritual need of expression, and *made* music, or that which is the fabrication of a clever intellect, and which is lacking in any spiritual or ideal content.

Now, a musical composition is a fabric. Like a piece of cloth, a rug, or a tapestry, it is woven from threads. But the threads from which a musical composition is woven are bits of melody; melodic particles, or motives. (If any one doubts this let him examine a well recognized musical masterpiece, such as a Beethoven symphony, or Wagner's "Meistersinger"). And inasmuch as these melodic threads are in themselves of value or character, will the completed fabric be beautiful and durable, assuming always that the weaving is skilfully done. But skilful weaving alone is not enough. The threads themselves must be strong, and full of character, otherwise the fabric, however skilfully woven, will not be significant or durable. There are many skilful musical weavers about at present, and at first sight it seems difficult to explain the apparently undeserved neglect which much

of their magnificently done work receives. But on careful examination it will usually be found that the melodic threads of their fabrics are of poor quality and lacking in distinction. These composers find their justification in a remark which Haydn is said to have made: "Not the theme, but the treatment." To take this remark literally is, however, very dangerous. I will venture to say that the compositions in which Haydn took his own medicine are not by any means the most vital and longest-lived of his creations.

This brings us naturally to the subject of folk-song. Of all classes of music, folk-song can produce the greatest number of examples of longevity, and it is but natural that we should turn to them to seek the reason of this length of life. In the first place, their comparative simplicity undoubtedly has much to do with it. Folk-songs are complete melodic compositions. They neither require nor depend upon accompanying harmony for their effect, and they are usually not of any great length. All these factors certainly help them to be easily retained by the memory, but they do not to my mind account satisfactorily for their exceptionally long life; in some cases a matter of centuries. Not all folk-songs are of equal musical value. The mere fact that a melody is a folk-song does not absolutely guarantee its high musical value. The indefatigability of collectors, and the ease with which the results of their labors are preserved—owing to the art of printing—has caused many a melody which would otherwise have died young to appear to have obtained quite a respectable old age. But there are a large number of folksongs, such as "The Campbells are coming," "Malbrouck," "My lodging is on the cold, cold ground," etc., of undoubted antiquity, and which have attained their old age by the natural means of being held with affection in the mind and heart of the people. I firmly believe that these would have lived even were there no folk-song collectors and no printed collections. The fact that they are of simple construction undoubtedly assisted in their preservation, but certainly was not the determining cause. The cause of the long life of these melodies is, firstly, that they express elemental human emotion; they awaken feelings of joy and sorrow, of mirth or tenderness which are common to us all, which lie deep in our hearts, and which we instinctively recognize as that which gives to life its beauty and significance. And secondly, that they are well-nigh *perfect expressions* of these heart qualities. There is a most fortunate harmony between the emotion expressed and the means of its expression. There are no superfluous notes,

but just enough. The intellect is in its true place as the servant and aid to expression, and is never allowed to assume the position of dictator as to what shall be expressed, as it so frequently does in art music.

Seldom, indeed, do we notice in our symphonic music this fortunate harmony between that which would find expression and the means of that expression. Too often we find it interesting, or clever, or technically well composed, etc. But when the emotion is deep and strong, and the technical means of expression adequate but not in evidence, then do we cease to think of technique, or any of its external characteristics, but are swayed perforce by the power of the music. That is the greatest technical proficiency, which does not appear, nor attract attention to itself as technical proficiency. That is the highest art which no longer appears to be art. Goethe says, "When art becomes Nature, then it is art indeed."

Now, the finest folk-songs are characterized by that perfection and inevitable quality which we perceive and feel in Nature's creations. Owing to their secret and mysterious growth, their floating through so many human minds, and being unconsciously moulded and perfected in the course of their romantic journey, they can be called more or less products of Nature. They are the wild flowers of music. And it is this perfection of expression which they ultimately attain, coupled with the deep and fundamental nature of the emotions expressed, which gives to them their heart-moving power and intimate appeal.

Great, indeed, are the temptations of the intellect. Because we can do a thing there is an ever-present restless urge to do it. For what are these wonderful and complicated technical proficiencies, which we have developed in ourselves, if not for use! So we must perforce write a symphony or other pretentious work of large dimensions, if only to show that we are able to do it. But many of us find that having provided ourselves with great toil and trouble (and it *is* toil) with these keen and costly mental tools, we have nothing to use them on but themselves. Some of us are in the position of the young man who bought a fine roll top desk, provided it with a complete and varied equipment of paper, ink, gold pens, ornate penwipers, etc., and sat himself down to write a great work. He then made a most embarrassing discovery. He had nothing to say. Of this primal need he had not thought before. Of course, as he had the equipment, the only thing he could do was to take some paper and cover it with insignificant balderdash. Now, this is just the predicament of many musical

composers, and that is the reason why, of all the music written, so little of it lives. The folk-song on the other hand, has something real to say. It expresses a true feeling and answers a need for the expression of this feeling. It could almost be described as a heart throb set to music. Expressing emotion as it does, it tells of something of more fundamental interest to humanity than the contrivances of the intellect, no matter how wonderful and complicated the latter may be. Hence, its long life.

It must again be understood that the ultimate life, or preservation of a musical composition does not depend upon the *cognoscenti* so much as it does upon the people. In almost any line of human endeavor the greatest opposition to progress comes from the experts in that line; the learned men, the academicians, or in other words, the conservers of the traditions respecting that particular line of human endeavor. The reason for this is psychological, and the explanation of this fact involves a short disquisition on the natural history of the human mind.

Our minds can only progress in learning or development through the acquisition of new ideas. Now, when a new idea is apprehended by the mind, the idea reacts upon the mind in two decidedly different ways. Firstly, its acquisition tends to strengthen and to develop; inasmuch as it opens new horizons of thought. It broadens and extends our mental outlook, and as long as we retain the new idea we shall not slip back into the intellectual narrowness in which we dwelt before its acquisition. On the other hand, the hard and fast retention of an idea will eventually exert such a dominative and restrictive influence on the mind as to interfere with its power of grasping other new ideas. Mental development may be likened to ascending a ladder, the rungs of which stand for different planes of consciousness. The rung on which we are standing certainly holds us at a certain height. But in order to ascend yet higher, we must place one foot on the next higher rung and draw the other up to it. We now stand at a higher level. But in the process of attaining this higher level we have left the rung on which we formerly stood. It is thus in mental development. Progress involves sacrifice. Many ideas which we formerly held have to be given up to make room for newer and larger ideas. And this sacrifice becomes harder and harder for us to make as we grow older.

Youth is the great time for acquiring new ideas. Our minds are then pliant and receptive. Our mental life moves and progresses at a very rapid rate. New ideas are being constantly grasped, and no idea is retained in undisputed possession of our

minds long enough to exert its secondary or baneful influence, *i. e.*, that of restricting further development. But after youth there comes a period of conservation. The acquisition of new ideas becomes less and less frequent. Those ideas which we have already acquired, being left more and more in undisturbed possession, finally take root and grow into the very structure of our minds themselves. As we grow older our minds naturally become less flexible and less able to acquire new ideas anyway, and the power and dominion of the ideas which we already possess continually increases. This process usually ends by certain ideas possessing us rather than our holding them. When the process is complete it then becomes impossible for us to progress or to develop any further.

Now the experts, who are especially trained in any particular line of human activity—as music, for instance—are those who know the most about it; those whose minds contain the greatest number of ideas relative to it, and who, owing to all their knowledge are most sensitive to any change from the traditional form of that activity. The majority of them are therefore peculiarly liable to be attacked by those prejudices which, while helping to maintain certain standards of excellence, are inimical to progress.

The people, on the other hand, not having this special knowledge, are free from the prejudice engendered by it. Its judgment, therefore, operating as it does through the long course of time, is saner and juster than that of the expert of any given period. In speaking of the “people” I do not refer to *hoi polloi*, but to that body of cultured persons who follow with interest the developments in any kind of human activity. In music the “people” means the audience. That “body” consists usually of persons of both good sense and refined sensitiveness, but who do not have a sufficiency of special knowledge to render them liable to become victims of the prejudices which attack the expert. Of course, public valuation of a new thing is liable to many errors; many mistakes, and even many false judgments. The great but inexperienced mind of the people is particularly prone to fall into those errors of judgment which the expert skilfully avoids. But give it time and its final verdict is far more balanced, sane, and true than that of the prejudiced expert.

The great thing to be desired is an “expert” with an “open mind”; *i. e.*, a person who knows his subject thoroughly and who has managed to steer clear of prejudice. A certain number of these persons are always in existence. Without them progress

would be well-nigh impossible. For they act as guides or steersmen to the rest of humanity, keeping the boat headed toward that which they feel to be good.

It has frequently been said that the human heart is greater than the human intellect. That is to say, emotions such as love, in all its various forms (as the love of man and woman, mother love, love of race, of country, friendship, altruism, etc.), courage, fear, hate, joy, and sorrow are more fundamental than reason and the transformations and inventions of the intellect. Who can doubt this? The lives of all primitive peoples, as the South Sea Islanders, or the North American Indians, afford a constant spectacle of human existence which is well-nigh devoid of intellectual development and yet is full to the brim of the fundamental emotions. Even among civilized peoples, the intellectual status of the mass never rises very high, and these fundamental emotions are the very stuff of which the lives of the vast majority are composed. And among the most highly intellectually developed individuals of a people, emotions of various kinds are their ruling powers. This is easily seen when anything in the nature of a crisis arises in their lives. Let the wife or child of one of these individuals be threatened with sickness or death, and the fundamental emotion of love at once asserts itself. Intellectual subtleties and interests are forgotten for the nonce and the intellect assumes its true place in the natural scheme of things as the "helper," the "tool"; in fact, the most powerful organ of man, but not the fundamental "man" himself. Their relationship to the race becomes at once manifest and they are for the time being one of the people, swayed by the same fundamental emotions as are all. Even Schopenhauer, amid all his metaphysical subtleties, declares that "the brain is not the finest part of man." Emerson, as is well-known, is continually asserting the dependence of the intellect on the spirit. He says in one of his essays: "The blindness of the intellect begins when it would be something of itself," and does not St. Paul say, "The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life"?

All these things being taken into consideration, it would seem that in the art of music those compositions which were inspired by, and which faithfully express emotion of various kinds stand a better chance of being cherished and loved by the people than those compositions in which the interest aroused is of a purely intellectual order; which are in many cases masterpieces of technique, but which, after all is said, spring from and are elaborations of "thought" rather than expressions of "feeling."

Hence, it naturally follows that the compositions first mentioned stand a better chance of living, or of being preserved.

Since the invention of the art of printing, it has become possible to preserve, or to make a pretense of preserving, numerous compositions of purely intellectual interest. But as far as the "people" are concerned, most of them are quite dead, and have long since ceased to be of any vital interest to us. They are interesting and their preservation is important from an historical point of view, in order that special students may see and realize how the art has grown and developed, but most of them have no vital interest of themselves. Whenever a piece of ancient music has survived, it has done so because it expressed a compelling emotion and was in that particular superior to the technical artificialities (invented by the intellect) of the time in which it was written. Händel's "Largo," which was written about 165 years ago, is today as alive as it ever was. It is expressive of a high and noble emotion and it is an illuminative and instructive thing to observe the hearty response of the "people" when it is played at a popular concert. Technically, however, it is far less complicated and intellectually interesting than many another contemporaneous composition which has long since been consigned to a deserved oblivion.

For it is the spirit of the people, as before mentioned, and not that of the scholars which decides what shall live and what shall die. The Scholiasts have at all times in the history of the art told us that all the fine and beautiful things which the far-seeing souls of great creative artists were revealing to us were bad, decadent, dangerous, and threatened the very existence of art itself. But it has been useless for them to warn us against that which was great, beautiful, or expressive simply because (on account of its newness) it failed to agree in certain externals with the then existent art. The "people" knew better, and despite the bitter warnings of the scholiasts have preserved to us these wonderful and emotionally expressive works. Meanwhile a fate which is sardonically humorous in its operation has consigned these very scholiasts themselves to that oblivion to which they desired to consign the sons of light.

I hope that it may not be deduced from the above considerations that I undervalue the intellect and its immense service in all departments of human activity. Lest the reader get such an idea, let me assert that I consider the intellect to be the greatest engine of expression of the human spirit. But it is *not* the human spirit; it is a tool. It should be a servant of the spirit,

obeying the desires and behests of its master with ever greater perfection, but never assuming to be the master itself. If this clever servant should usurp the position of master, building complexity upon complexity without the informing light of the spirit, no matter how dazzling and quasi-impressive the structure, it will lack the soul of life; the sun of inspiration will have set; and a vain thing will have come to pass. And this is what continually occurs in music. How many compositions we can all recall, of which the technical construction is not only flawless and quite beyond criticism, even rousing our wonder and admiration at the marvelous complexity and ingenuity displayed, but which nevertheless leave us cold when we hear them. They appeal to our heads rather than to our hearts. They have no particular emotional message for us, and hence, I believe, are destined for a short life. This emotional content, which I claim to be absolutely necessary to the continued life of a composition, may be of a light and charming kind, as in Schubert's song, "Hark, Hark the Lark," or of a more noble and spiritual nature, as in the Andante from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Both of these compositions have lasted quite a while already, while many another, which was planned on a more intellectually ambitious scale, has fallen by the wayside. How many a composition one hears which does not give the impression that it *had to be written*, but that it was written by some one who had the technique and felt bound to do something because he was able to. It is as if one walked round the block for exercise. But walking round the block does not get one anywhere except to the place from which he started. And in regard to these compositions, they are not real music, but merely technical exercises whose only value is to keep the composer's mental muscles in training. A short time ago I attended a symphony concert at which one of those still-born compositions was played. There was the usual perfunctory applause with no heart in it. Directly afterward a composition from the same period was played which aroused the audience to enthusiasm, and two ladies sitting behind me exclaimed: "Ah! *he* has something to *say*." It was a comment much to the point on what I am writing about.

Now, in the gradual growth and expansion of the art of music during the last thousand years, it has frequently been a temptation not to be resisted—and to which many schools have in turn succumbed—to make of music a purely intellectual cult, interesting to scholars only, and having little concern or interest for the people. From this dry, barren and remote intellectualism it has always been rescued by the timely arrival of the "great"

composer. He has restored the balance in his works of intellectual development and fundamental emotion. While making use of the ingenious technical elaborations of his predecessors, he has yet infused into his work a compelling and powerful human feeling. This feeling dominates, and one realizes that the technical or intellectual side of his work is but the vehicle for that which is greater than itself. Intellectualism is no longer its own excuse for being, but assumes once more its proper relation to the spirit. Such periods are illustrated by the early artificialities of the English school, culminating in Purcell; the amazing ingenuity of the Netherlands contrapuntists, followed by the appearance of Orlando di Lasso; and the halting, dry, and uninspired music of the early church which was of a sudden quickened and vitalized by the appearance of Palestrina. All things considered, it would seem that music which is inspired by and which strongly reflects or expresses human feeling, is destined to live, whereas music in which the preponderating interest is an intellectual one, no matter how interesting it is, is destined to die. It is said that "Music is the language of emotion." This is such a trite and banal saying that it is in some disrepute. It is nevertheless *true*, and woe to the composer who forgets it.

In a word, that which makes music live is not so much its *art* quality as its *heart* quality.